



Background

The development of musical independence (MI) has been a concern of music education for decades and continues a lively discourse today. This independence allows students to “participate in the formulation of concepts and the acquisition of meaningful musical learning” (Regelski, 1969) and “participate in music experiences independently by making personal decisions about the music” (Kindall-Smith, 2010). Paradoxically, the majority of students at the secondary level receive their music education through large ensemble settings, which “places complete control in the hands of teachers” (Williams, 2011), thereby inhibiting MI development. Still, it is argued that the large ensemble setting can be a space for this development and that the “moral ends of public schooling are to equip young people to be independent thinkers and actors” and that the ensemble can be a space for this development (Allsup, 2012).

Many studies have previously looked at self-regulation and methods for developing independent practice, which are key components to MI. Methods such as Comprehensive Musicianship through Performance (CMP) have targeted skills-based outcomes in large ensembles that encourage the development of MI (O’Toole, 2003; Sindberg, 2012) and constructivist practices develop facility for independent thought (Wiggins, 2009). Scott (2011) proposes a model for constructivist practice that consists of two components: **teacher-directed instruction and student-led analysis**. This model served as this study’s theoretical framework for looking at the high school large ensemble as an agent for the development of MI, using this constructivist approach.

Findings

Three primary themes summarize the findings from the observations at LHS:

- **Band environment** refers to the physical and emotional space that the band creates.
- **Band as a musical space**—The band maintains a focus on music experience and expectations. These experiences and expectations lead to the students’ capacity for impacting their own musical development.
- **Band as a social space**—Social environment impacts a student’s MI in many ways, including influencing students to be in band, increasing their willingness to take risks, and giving and receiving support, including to and from other students and the teacher.
- **Band as an extramusical space**—Many skills that are not necessarily musical but are necessary for MI are developed in band, such as preparation, confidence, team work, commitment, and organization.
- **Teacher-directed instruction** provides students with the foundational skills and understanding to allow for MI as well as support for initial development of student MI.
- **Expectation for student problem solving**—Broad, analytical questioning is a key component of establishing an expectation for student problem solving in the large ensemble.
- **Space for independent decision making**—Ensemble rehearsal allows opportunities for students to make and justify their own musical decisions.
- **Teacher-directed modeling**—This modeling includes performance by the teacher as well as examples by students and outside models that are brought to the students’ attention by the teacher.
- **Intentional vagueness**—The teacher uses analogy, metaphor, and broad instruction to develop student ability to discern meaning and application of learning for themselves.
- **Student-led problem solving and decision making**—Students are given opportunities to make music independent of the teacher’s direct instruction while still in an academic setting. This setting has expectations for musical growth while allowing students to apply MI skills learned in the large ensemble. During these activities, students:
 - Diagnose musical errors
 - Solve music issues
 - Make music decisions
 - Direct their own music making

Abstract

Musical independence (MI) is often listed as an objective of high school instrumental large ensembles, but the processes by which it develops in this setting have not been studied directly. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to investigate how a high school concert band can foster the development of student musical independence. The guiding questions for this study are:

- What are the characteristics of a music ensemble when its director is focused upon developing student musical independence?
- What are the characteristics of student musical independence in a music ensemble? How does the structure and culture of the ensemble contribute to its students’ musical independence?
- To what extent do the teacher’s attitudes and behaviors contribute to this culture?

Teachers and students from a Midwestern suburban high school band were interviewed and observed over the course of an eight-week concert cycle. This school was selected due to its director’s commitment to developing student musical independence while also maintaining high standards of musical excellence. This ensemble was followed from first sight read of concert pieces through concert performance to understand how musical independence is developed and displayed in all stages of music preparation in the large ensemble. Individual student accountability in large ensemble rehearsal, student ownership of music decision-making, and student-direction of curricular chamber ensembles were considered to be evidence of developing student musical independence. The study develops a three-part model for the development of musical independence including the band environment, teacher-led instruction, and student-directed decision-making, expanding upon the work done by Scott (2011). Possible implications for music teacher training and professional development in instructional practice are discussed, as well as further areas of research in this area.

“You have to be a leader and you have to figure out your part. Usually, during band, the conductor can help you out if he knows there’s something wrong, but it’s more based on you. It’s your responsibility to figure it out.”

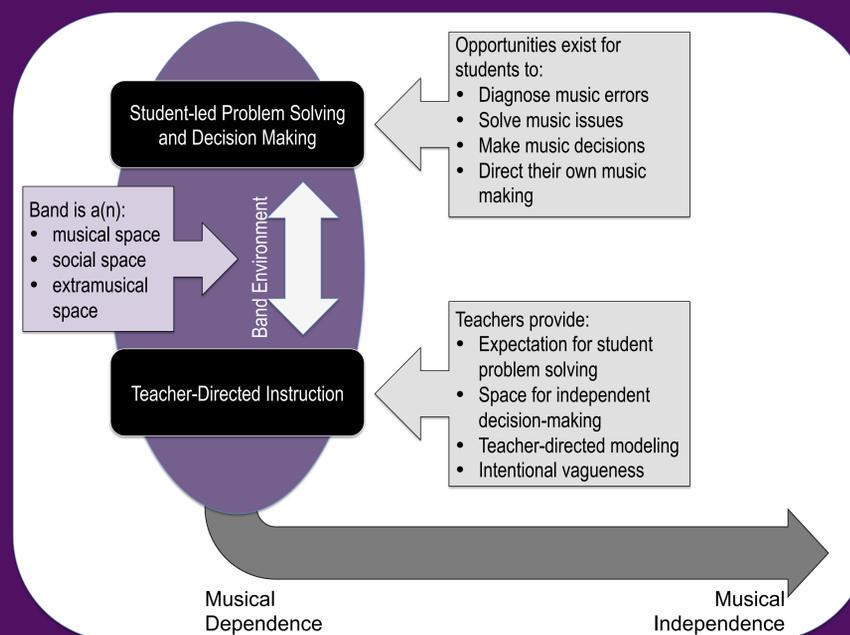
(Sarah, sophomore horn)

“We develop in [the students] the independent skills to at least do rudimentary problem solving, practice skills, taking accountability for their part as part of the larger ensemble, those types of things. If we can develop those in the younger bands, we’re able to give—going back to my computer programming days—‘go execute subroutine M’.”

(Mr. Guss, lead director, LHS Bands)

On monitoring student-led music making: “Making musical choices and seeing, trying to make them do that stuff and create that, whether it’s a melodic line or articulation. Do that without prompting it, or maybe us giving them smaller prompts and then taking that and making musical statements out of it.”

(Mr. Kinder, assistant director, LHS Bands)



Study Site Selection

Lakefield High School Symphonic Band

LHS is a large suburban high school in a major Midwestern metropolitan area. The music program has a national reputation for excellence. Four bands comprise the curricular concert band program. Two bands are auditioned, a third is non-auditioned, and the fourth is a freshman-only band.

The Symphonic Band is the third ensemble and has open enrollment for sophomores through seniors. It is comprised of three groups of students: upperclassmen who have opted not to audition for the upper ensembles, freshmen who have auditioned out of the freshman band, and students who require more growth before enrolling in the auditioned ensembles. The ensemble’s curricular focus is to **prepare students for more advanced music study and performance**, requiring greater MI in practice and preparation. Chamber ensembles are held during class time, and sectionals and small ensembles are a required curricular component of all ensembles.

Pete Guss

LHS was selected for this study due to its lead director, Mr. Guss. He was in his 17th year of teaching and 2nd at LHS. Throughout his professional career, he has maintained a focus on **developing student musical independence while also maintaining high standards for musical excellence**. Curricular chamber music and student leadership are at the center of his musical practice. He is assisted by Mr. Kinder in the direction of the Symphonic Band.

Methodology

This qualitative case study included the following components:

- 15 observations of large and chamber ensemble rehearsals over an eight week rehearsal cycle of the LHS Symphonic Band from January through March
- Individual, semi-structured, audio recorded interviews with the lead director (Mr. Guss), assistant director (Mr. Kinder), and a student teacher (Mr. Hill) of the LHS Symphonic Band
- Individual and/or small group semi-structured, audio recorded interviews with 26 of the ensemble’s 47 students. Sampling of these students was both through volunteering and specific targeting based on unique perspective
- Collection of artifacts including band website, syllabus, and assessments

Observations and interviews were coded using in vivo, process, and descriptive coding. A second cycle of coding included the use of a priori codes derived from the work of O’Toole (2003) and Scott (2011).

Trustworthiness was established through triangulation of data, member checking, peer scrutiny, and reflective commentary. Issues of reflexivity included the researcher’s previous association with Mr. Guss. This familiarity prompted the selection of LHS as a site study, but also impacted expectations for the presence and inclusion of methods of instruction that supported musical independence.

Discussion

Musical independence (MI) is created through the interaction of the three themes of this study. In this setting, it is this interaction that allows MI to become apparent in the students’ behaviors and responses.

The environment of the band supports both the teacher and student components of the model. The musical space provides the content for MI, the social space provides the emotional support, and the extramusical skills are necessary for the musical knowledge and skills to be independently applied.

Teacher-directed instruction provides students with the requisite skills and knowledge to be effective musicians independent of the teacher. Student-led problem solving and decision making allows students to develop and experience their own MI. These two elements are influenced by each other; teachers instruct based upon what is observed in the student-led sessions, and students direct their own music making largely from what is taught to them. MI exists on a continuum, from students who are completely dependent to those who are capable of being fully independent of a teacher.

These findings suggest the importance of questioning strategies, project-based assessment, and constructivist practices as part of pre-service and continuing education. Student-directed music making is not linear and does not resemble a rigidly structured rehearsal and requires a different set of skills for monitoring and evaluating student progress. Students need to be provided with opportunities where success is dependent upon their actions exclusively and where mistakes can be made and reflected upon safely. The inclusion of authentic opportunities for students to direct their own music, including sectionals, solo literature, and chamber music, is critical to the development of MI.

Further research is necessary to understand how and if this model of MI presents itself in other settings. Additionally, longitudinal study of ensembles focused on MI needs to be done to understand if these practices result in greater student musical independence.

“I try hard, don’t always succeed, to question instead of tell, because that’s a lot more interactive and a lot more responsive, and makes the kids think more. It’s easy to tell them. It’s hard to have them question and answer, but in the long run, that builds better musicians. It’s about making choices and making mistakes, letting the kids make some of those decisions.”

(Mr. Guss, lead director, LHS Bands)

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For more information regarding this study, visit <http://bnweidner.wix.com/home#MI/cra1>

